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Co-producing community and individual change through theatrical interventions

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the role of co-produced creative methods in creating change, with particular reference to marginalized communities and taboo topics. In doing so, the paper offers a vignette of a day-long theatrical outreach event exploring the topic of female genital mutilation (FGM). Our paper offers discussion of how creative methods can facilitate individual and collective change surrounding taboo topics, such as FGM, rather than the often discussed relationship between creative methods and organizational change. Furthermore, we suggest that co-produced creative methods are beneficial in providing communities with opportunities to approach taboo societal issues in new and inclusive ways.

Co-producing community and individual change through theatrical interventions

There is a growing interest in the role of creative methods as catalysts for creating change. This paper contributes to this debate by examining the role of theatrical interventions in facilitating community dialogue about sensitive issues, potentially leading to individual and collective change. To investigate the possibilities of theatrical intervention, we consider an event that explored the concept of female genital mutilation (FGM) within a particular community in the Midlands, UK. This specific theatrical intervention was led by an award winning theatre outreach department, referred to throughout this article as Encompass (pseudonym). The theatrical intervention consisted of personal testimonials, a documentary style theatrical performance and a question and answer (Q and A) session. As such, this paper examines Encompass's use of theatrical techniques in its quest to facilitate dialogue, change and co-production processes. We argue that such approaches offer valuable opportunities for local communities to learn about and consider new approaches to dealing with difficult, taboo topics.

Drawing on a longitudinal ethnography of Encompass, this paper presents empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. It begins with an overview of the current academic literature on the role of theatrical interventions in facilitating change and co-production processes. For the purposes of this study, co-production is defined as multiple and potentially diverse individuals working together in pursuit of a common goal, typically within a theatrical setting. It differs from other forms of collaborative work in that it prioritises marginalised or unheard community voices, thus encouraging more meaningful community engagement and participation (Beebejaun, Durose, Rees, Richardson, & Richardson, 2015; Scharinger, 2013; Smart, 2014). Indeed, the background and status of participants is often disregarded to promote equality between individuals involved in co-produced activities (Kumagai, 2012; Meisiek & Barry, 2007). This is followed by the methodology and presentation of the FGM event. The discussion examines the value of theatrical interventions as a way of accessing multiple perspectives, addressing difficult subjects and prompting dialogue and connections between diverse groups. The conclusion highlights the value of theatrical interventions as a way of co-producing knowledge and opening avenues for individual and collective change to occur. The success of such interventions is dependent on the theatre's being regarded as a trusted organization by the community which provides a safe space for community members, professionals and theatre practitioners to explore complex issues and move towards positive change.

In so doing, the paper adds to the existing literature on theatrical interventions as a valuable aid in addressing potentially sensitive topics from either an individual or collective perspective. Building on existing literature espousing the potential of creative methods as a positive force for change (Broderick & Pearce, 2001; Stager Jacques, 2013; Westwood, 2004), our paper broadens current knowledge on how co-produced theatrical techniques can facilitate change and encourage multiple forms of communication about topics that might typically be considered taboo by those with the potential to enact change.

Theatrical interventions as tools for change and co-production

Creative methods of research are becoming increasingly popular, with studies lending focus to activities such as dance (Hujala et al., 2016; Zeitner, Rowe & Jackson, 2016), art-work (Dezeuze, 2010) and theatre (Boal, 2000; Scharinger, 2013). Indeed, the use of theatrical activities as a catalyst for change has been well documented within the academic literature (Boal, 2000; Clark & Mangham, 2004; Cox, 2012; Kohn & Cain, 2005; Scharinger, 2013), with

studies typically focusing on organizational, health care, or educational settings (Durden, 2013; John, 2013; Stager Jacques, 2013; Westwood, 2004). The concept of co-production is also acknowledged by the literature in relation to engaging individuals in theatrical activities (Bar-Lev & Vitner, 2012; Dezeuze, 2010; Fenge, Fannin & Hicks, 2012; Lafreniere & Cox, 2013; Mattern, 1999; Scharinger, 2013; Smart, 2014), which are argued to have the potential to dissolve status and hierarchies, and facilitate inclusive and productive dialogues across diverse parties.

Existing literature suggests that theatrical interventions can facilitate a more effective understanding of problematic and sensitive issues, allowing multiple and diverse participants to work together in pursuit of a common goal (Sementelli & Abel, 2007). However, there is little evidence to suggest that theatrical interventions have been used to tackle taboo issues. On the contrary, the existing literature rather lends itself towards a variety of instances in which theatrical interventions have been used as tools for organizational change (Broderick & Pearce, 2001; Stager Jacques, 2013; Westwood, 2004), with multiple studies also referencing the role of co-production within theatrical interventions (Bar-Lev & Vitner, 2012; Dezeuze, 2010; Fenge et al., 2012; Lafreniere & Cox, 2013; Saldana, 2003; Scharinger, 2013). Indeed, there is a tendency in the literature to see theatrical interventions in a positive light (Steyaert et al., 2006) and as leading unproblematically to individual and collective forms of change (Clark & Mangham, 2004; Simpson, 2009). In particular, the literature suggests that theatrical activities resulting in change at an individual level rely heavily on the active participation of the individual (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Simpson, 2009), while collective change is the direct result of individual engagement with theatrical activities (Clark & Mangham, 2004). In considering collective change as an outcome of theatrical interventions, Cox argues that performance presents a "challenge to enact ... social action" (2012, p. 124). The literature further suggests that community change is usually demonstrated in an enhanced ability to tackle societal issues in a grass roots fashion (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014). Furthermore, theatrical interventions designed to facilitate change at individual and collective levels are seen to be based on co-production practices which ensure that all opinions and types of expertise are given equal status and taken into consideration (Bar-Lev & Vitner, 2012; Dezeuze, 2010; Fenge et al., 2012; Lafreniere & Cox, 2013; Saldana, 2003; Scharinger, 2013; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

Co-production is seen as a valuable tool in theatrical interventions due to its ability to give voice to diverse groups of individuals (Bar-Lev & Vitner, 2012; Dezeuze, 2010; Fenge et al., 2012; Lafreniere & Cox, 2013; Mattern, 1999; Scharinger, 2013; Smart, 2014). It has emerged as a potential solution to the criticism that research conducted in and on communities often fails to meaningfully include communities in its design and undertaking (Beebeejaun et al., 2015), being increasingly perceived as a viable solution to the so-called "relevance gap" between theory and practice. Co-production further aims to put the principles of empowerment into practice, offering communities greater control and providing them with opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience (Beebeejaun et al., 2015; Meltzer, 2015).

As Kumagai (2012) argues, the use of co-production within theatrical interventions can transcend status and hierarchies, allowing diverse individuals to "enter into dialogue with one another as equals" (Meisiek & Barry, 2007, p. 1808). Co-production's ability "to bridge the boundaries between different social worlds" (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008, p. 426), conveys the potential for diverse individuals to work together in pursuit of a shared goal. Although Zietsma and Lawrence (2010, p. 214) remind us that, the "multiple, often conflicting" opinions offered by those engaged in co-produced activities may cause conflict between group members, when successful, theatrical interventions can create, "real, long-lasting, progressive change" (Tran, 2014, p. 117) in the everyday lives of community members. In order to affect such change, it is important that all parties affected by the issues at stake are included in co-production practices. Co-produced projects are often seen to lack the participation of lay people who may

feel unqualified to contribute to discussions with professionals. Without the input of such individuals, crucial views are unlikely to surface as “a whole section of the population is kept at a distance” (Fenge et al., 2012, p. 551). While it is unlikely that all relevant parties will be included in all co-production activities (Andreasen, 1996; Fenge et al., 2012; Fleishman, 2012; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008), the input of lay participants, or “experts by experience” (Fenge et al., 2012), is invaluable, as they provide experience-based knowledge.

Thus, although the existing literature tends to focus solely on organizational change, overall the use of creative methods has the potential to be of use in a variety of situations. Indeed, the facilitation of discussion via non-traditional verbal means of communication may be particularly beneficial in dealing with sensitive or taboo issues. One such example is female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is a largely unreported crime which involves “partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons” (World Health Organization, 2018), usually occurring in children. Statistics suggest that “5,700” cases of FGM were recorded in England alone during 2015–2016 (Guardian, 2016), however this figure does not include those who have already undergone the procedure which can lead to severe health consequences or death. The literature offers a variety of examples illuminating how interventions could be facilitated. Østebø and Østebø (2014), for example, suggest that interventions at community level from religious leaders can be a powerful motivator for change. Such individuals are often seen as “vessels of authority” within the local community (2014, p. 84), potentially affording them influence on challenging topics. Berg and Denison (2013), however, suggest several different types of potential intervention when dealing with FGM. The authors discuss the ways in which interventions in the form of training, formal classroom education, media communication, outreach and advocacy, and informal adult education (Berg & Denison, 2013) can be beneficial in attempts to eradicate FGM practices and our paper reports on one such attempt.

In summary, the literature sees theatrical interventions as valuable tools for change within organizational, health care or educational settings (Beck, Belliveau, Lea, & Wager, 2011; Boal, 2000; Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Paskow, 1983; Scharinger, 2013), with co-production playing a prominent role in achieving such changes (Fenge et al., 2012; Kumagai, 2012; Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Saldana, 2003). However, the use of such methods in co-produced projects designed to tackle large scale issues such as FGM remains little explored. In addition, the literature is also lacking in studies as to how theatrical interventions could facilitate change for marginalised individuals and communities. In what follows, we provide an example of multiple and diverse individuals coming together in pursuit of a common goal (Sementello & Abel, 2007) via a theatrical intervention made by Encompass, a theatre outreach department. The department’s mission is to engage with community members and other relevant stakeholders such as local authorities, umbrella organizations, third sector organizations, government departments and academic/research institutions, in order to solve societal problems by giving voice to marginalised groups and individuals. The department’s work sheds light on the potential benefits of using creative methods to tackle community problems, in line with the stand taken by much of the existing literature. Before setting out the empirical part of the paper, we outline our research methodology.

Methodology

This study forms part of a broader ethnography about the role of theatrical interventions in developing community change, particularly the use of theatrical techniques to facilitate dialogue and co-production processes with marginalised communities. In designing the research, we began from the assumption that reality is a social construct (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Gergen, 2001) that cannot be understood objectively. Moreover, in exploring the “subjective and everyday experience” (Broussine & Beeby, 2008, p. 21) of the theatre practitioners and

community members, we were attempting to understand a complex and dynamic social situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Knights, 1995; Yin, 2003) that could not be captured by hypothesis testing, isolating variables and establishing causality (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Gergen, 2001). As such, our work falls into a post-positivist (Prasad, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) or interpretative (Burrell & Morgan, 1992) epistemology. We assume that people are constantly engaged in sense-making activities (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) because our knowledge of the world is subjective. As Linden and Cermak (2007, p. 45) argue: "humans are interpretive beings who interact with the world through a culturally transmitted background that configures and makes sense of it." Our knowledge of the world is thus produced and reproduced through our social interactions.

Ethnographic research allowed us to consider the "idea of 'walking a mile in the shoes of others' and attempt to gain insight by being in the same social space" as those involved in the co-production of the event (Madden, 2010, p. 1). Indeed, doing so offered insight into the cultural understandings (Van Maanen, 2011) of FGM practices as held by the participants. Given that FGM is a sensitive topic, taking account of the subjective, dynamic and complex nature of knowledge was particularly important, as it lent credence to the notion of individual expression as valid. It reminded us of the importance of listening to and representing marginalised or unheard community voices in our research, thereby encouraging more meaningful community engagement and participation (Beebeejaun et al., 2015). Moreover, as Broussine and Simpson (2008, p. 22) note, participants may typically feel reservations about expression thoughts and emotions about challenging topics and as such, their contributions should be viewed as valuable insights. They argue that in studies of difficult topics such as FGM, participants can hold multiple and diverse accounts of shared events and experiences, facilitating an environment in which participants can be enabled "to find and use their voices ... when it may be difficult to do so in other circumstances" (Broussine & Simpson, 2008, p. 22).

In terms of empirical data, this paper is drawn from a wider, longitudinal ethnography of Encompass (pseudonym), the award-winning outreach department of a theatre. The empirical material used in this paper includes 23 semi-structured interviews, approximately 50 hours of participant observations and document examination including books, articles and relevant online sources. The interviews were conducted via either telephone, Skype, or in person at a place of the participants' choice such as the theatre, a church, a community fire station, a university and a local pub. The interviewees consisted of 3 academics, 7 professionals, 7 volunteers and 6 theatre practitioners, of whom only 4 were male. All participants were provided with a pseudonym in order to protect their anonymity. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then sent to the participants to be confirmed. The authors attended a wide range of the theatrical interventions staged by the theatre. This allowed us to gain an understanding of the common sense, every day, unwritten and unspoken, tacitly known "rule of engagement" (Yanow, Ybema & Van Hulst, 2012, p. 2) known to situational "natives", who in this case, were those effected by or involved with, the aftermath of FGM practices.

The interview data was supplemented by participant observation which resulted in more than 100 pages of notes. Taking part in theatrical events allowed us to work from "an insider perspective" (Bell & Willmott, 2015, p. 28) and create a shared platform by which we were able to connect with the participants through a shared understanding of local conditions including cultural knowledge. These events included co-production workshops where participants explored relevant local issues using improvisational methods (see Figures 1 and 2 for examples of typical workshop outputs) as well as performances.

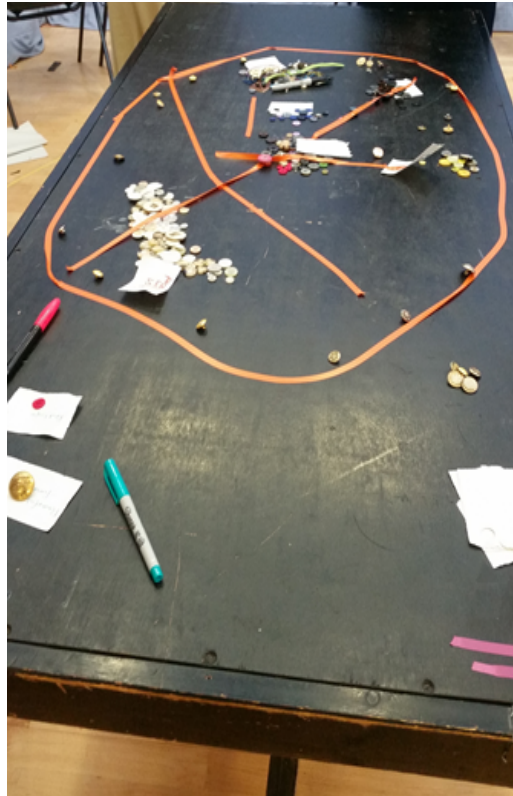


Figure 1: Co-production workshop identifying community problems.



Figure 2: Using Encompass's theatre space for co-produced activities.

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) was used to analyse the data. All three authors read the transcripts, the observational data and the available documents independently and pinpointed recurrent themes. The authors then compared their initial interpretations and agreed on the main themes of change, co-production, communication and catharsis. Data, method and author triangulation was employed by the authors to ensure consistency between the information gathered via our chosen research tools. The use of data triangulation also provided a deeper understanding of Encompass's work through a comparison of multiple sources, giving the authors the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the information obtained (Holland, 1999).

Co-production in practice

The following material provides a vignette of a theatrical intervention around the topic of FGM that brought together 60 community members and professionals and was facilitated by theatre practitioners. The community in which the theatre is embedded is both multicultural and diverse. As such it includes a significant proportion of potentially transient marginalised groups such as refugees and asylum seekers, for some of whom FGM may be considered as a social norm.

While the issue of FGM has implications on a global scale, the idea to tackle the problem within the local area was raised by a local specialist FGM midwife who had been struggling to expand community knowledge of the practice for several years. The midwife, Thea, discussed her motivations for bringing the project to Encompass's attention stating that she,

had been working alongside African women for about 15 years, and I wanted to inform the community about the number of women that were coming into [the area], and the health issues that they have, which are associated with the cutting ... and the impact that their health will have on the future health services here in [the area] (interview transcript).

In considering the initial contact between Thea and Encompass, Alexis, an Encompass practitioner suggested that the department initially acted in a reactive manner to the community's concerns, as a health-care professional alerted them to the issue:

The FGM project came from a chat with a midwife who was like this is a problem in the area, no one's listening to me, it's like oh ok well maybe we can do something for you, and we can get some information out there (interview transcript).

Following the initial suggestion, Encompass took a proactive stance to the community's desire for change and contacted various professionals and community members with an interest in stopping FGM practices. This resulted in a variety of individuals attending the event including representatives from the police force, health care professionals, academics, professionals working with the local migrant and asylum-seeking communities, and other members of the local community.

Hadley, another theatre practitioner, confirmed that in undertaking the FGM project the department initially took a reactive stance in order to better understand the issues highlighted by community members:

Everything that we tend to do comes from other people ... we don't go ok this is what you're going to do and this is what we're going to do about it, it's like ok, what can you do about it or what conversation can we have, so everything is, kind of co-produced in a sort of way (interview transcript).

The one day FGM event took place on the theatre's main stage. Being a theatre in the round, the physical space was inclusive and connective as there was no physical boundary (curtain) between the participants and performers.

The event was split into two sections: the first session gave three speakers the opportunity to share their knowledge of FGM with a large audience. The speakers comprised of a female Nigerian academic who discussed cultural aspects of FGM, a prominent member of the police force dealing with child exploitation, and a local midwife. Following the speakers' presentations, a question and answer session was facilitated by Encompass practitioners: the audience members were keen to share their own knowledge and establish connections with others working on FGM issues. Several audience members also shared their emotional distress. Participants were unsettled by the detailed information presented to them about FGM practices, while others shared their shock that such practices were taking place in their community.

The second part of the event included a performance by Encompass practitioners, thereby showcasing the department's ability to act proactively in order to facilitate change. Hadley stated that Encompass,

created a performance that was based upon real stories, because we do lots of documentary theatre, so real life stories about FGM ... what we do with the performance as well is not pointing the finger, it's not saying you know, this is really wrong, or you're evil ... because these parents who have performed FGM on their children or want that to happen, only want that because it's the best thing for their child, they believe ... so we don't want to highlight these people are bad people because in all other aspects of their parenting, they're not, it's just this one little thing, that they believe is really, really beneficial for their child, and so that's sort of where we were going with our drama (interview transcript).

The upsetting nature of the performance necessitated the use of actors (rather than community members) who were brought in to play several of the roles within the play, including those of the two female children. In addition to giving a presentation, Thea, the midwife, was also cast to play the role of the midwife in order to give the performance a more authentic feel. The performance was created in the style of a documentary drama (see, for example, Scharinger, 2013) and as such offered the audience a window into the potential circumstances and social norms of daily life that may indicate when and how FGM practices are likely to occur.

The performance focused on the story of two school girls. One of the girls is seen telling her friend that her parents have organized a party for her however she must first undergo a procedure to make her into a woman. The girl is unhappy and feeling scared about the procedure, but wants to please her parents. The performance also featured the girl's parents in a discussion about their plans, showing that while they were aware that FGM is illegal in the UK they still believed it to be the best course of action for their daughter. The play's message was that while the parents of the school girl have the best of intentions for their daughter in line with their cultural traditions and norms, that the girl's friend should express her concerns to a member of school staff in an attempt to stop FGM practices occurring. A further scene within the performance focuses on the story of an adult woman who is receiving care from a midwife after undergoing the FGM procedure as a child. This storyline within the play aims to shed light on the complications that may arise as a result of FGM practices with particular emphasis being placed upon women who may wish to have children (observation notes).

Participants were also keen to comment on the effectiveness of using both standard presentations and the performance as knowledge sharing techniques during the Q and A

sessions. For example, a community member who was part of the audience, found the inclusion of the dramatic performance particularly moving. She stated “you don’t forget them things”, thereby referring to the visualization of FGM via the performance. She also said that “if you read that on a leaflet, it’s nowhere near as effective”, suggesting that she found the use of performance within presentations a more “powerful” way of getting the message across (observational notes).

Similarly, Thea also noted that,

sometimes when you do presentations and then you actually do a drama of an incident, it kind of sits in peoples’ minds, I think it’s a very respected place (the theatre) ... it sends out important messages to the public (interview transcript).

This suggests that the use of performance creates a more memorable experience for audience members. The evocative nature of using a performance designed to inform individuals about the somewhat disturbing topic of FGM brought to the fore a mixed range of emotions from audience members and performers. As Finn, a professional working with young people in care for the county council suggested, “it’s a disturbing topic, it’s making people aware, so people know”, thereby hinting at the necessity of gaining knowledge about topics that are typically difficult for audience members to digest (interview transcript). Another community member said:

It is challenging and some of those topics are really quite traumatic ... watching the performance makes your skin curl ... it’s a really important issue ... so we have to be able to talk about it (interview transcript).

In talking about the outcomes of the event, Thea said that,

the feedback was fantastic, people were shocked, one woman actually had to leave ... she got up and left, she couldn’t stand, you know, it was too raw for her ... she returned once she composed herself (interview transcript).

Following the performance audience members were once again invited to share their feelings. While the first session of the event was treated as a factual information session with relatively few audience members expressing emotions, the latter session led to more emotive interventions. As a result of the documentary drama, the audience felt more connected to the topic with multiple participants admitting that they had not realised the full extent of the issues associated FGM in the UK.

The broad range of emotional reactions created by the performance lead to some participants expressing negative feelings. For example, fear and being overwhelmed by the topic of FGM accompanied the desire to further one’s knowledge of FGM practices within the community. Alyssa, a professional who has been working with Encompass for many years, noted the difficult nature of the performance arguing that Encompass had,

touched on really difficult issues ... it’s not about using theatre for the soft and fluffy, is it? (interview transcript).

Reflecting on the role of the theatre interventions provided by Encompass, and the FGM drama, one of the theatre practitioners said,

people actually feel empowered to do something, as well because FGM is such a huge topic, if you look at it in such a massive scale you think oh my God where

do you start, so you can't get overwhelmed by those things and conversations ... so I don't really think there's any room for, finding things difficult, you're always going to because you're human, but I think you just have to put a professional head on about it (interview transcript).

Many of the audience members suggested that they felt committed and inspired to tackle the issue of FGM in the local community, while also feeling that they possessed more knowledge about FGM with which they could perform their respective roles within the community:

Several participants offered their own contact details to other audience members during Q and A session following performance. Participants seem very keen to work with other attendees on community FGM issues (observation notes).

A final issue brought to the fore by the audience was the potential for further dissemination of the messages emanating from the FGM event. Such theatre interventions were referred to as "vehicles to kind of help communities celebrate as well as tackle social issues" (interview transcript). Similarly, one of the author's reflections on the department suggested that:

Encompass is facilitating a co-produced event but also acting as a nexus through which the potential to inspire further co-production is possible (observation notes).

Moreover, Thea stressed the role of such theatrical intervention in facilitating change in the community:

It is so important to get the message out to people to help these women in the community who are psychologically damaged, have difficulty with their health ... and, [Encompass] is a great platform (interview transcript).

Thea's argument has much in agreement with the academic literature's view that arts-based methods such as theatrical techniques can be beneficial to those experiencing traumatic events (Hanes, 2000; Scharinger, 2013).

Thea also noted that,

the outreach work that [Encompass] does, is so very important, it touches topics like domestic violence, elderly abuse, FGM, it brings them up to the public and I think that's really important, and we are thinking ... of actually touring the schools with the FGM project (interview transcript).

Discussing the audiences Encompass is able to reach, one theatre practitioner discussed the importance of the involvement of many volunteers and individuals from the local university (see Fenge et al., (2012) on the role of lay participants). She credits their involvement with helping the project to widen its reach, starting as a relatively small event of 60 people to then be performed "in front of 400". The director of the outreach department further elaborated that,

off the back of the first performance we were then invited by the police to a big FGM like awareness event, and we took the performance there, and currently we are having a conversation with a lady who makes documentaries about quite hard hitting topics and she has a documentary about FGM (interview transcript).

The FGM event can itself be seen as an act of co-production due to the combined knowledge and efforts of the diverse parties responsible for its creation and facilitation. The main purpose of the event was twofold, offering further understanding to those attempting to address issues of FGM in the local community while also bringing together the relevant parties in order to tackle such issues more effectively in the community. Improving the attendees' understanding of FGM issues facilitated change at an individual level. Indeed, Encompass's ability to alternate its organizational practices between taking a reactive or proactive stance helped to facilitate participant change. As participants became more knowledgeable about FGM they also became more committed to addressing the issue, as can be seen in their desire to make connections with other attendees. Furthermore, such individual change is likely to affect the marginalised community in question. Through participants' improved understanding of the lives of those involved in FGM through the performance section of the event, their actions towards such individuals are likely to be altered.

Discussion

The theatrical intervention presented here provided access to multiple perspectives from which potential FGM scenarios could be considered by the participants. As such, the use of performance served to make the event highly memorable for attendees, providing first-hand examples of occurrence of FGM practices and their impact on the community and individuals. The use of performance also served to increase participants' understanding of FGM, as through the visual and auditory stimulus presented, participants were able to better emphasize and connect with the story portrayed during the performance.

Through increased understanding of the issues surrounding FGM, audience members suggested they felt more able and to a certain extent more empowered to tackle such issues within their local community (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Sementelli & Abel, 2007; Simpson, 2009). Such willingness to address a difficult problem demonstrates personal commitment. However, it is also indicative of the potential for co-produced activities to make FGM issues more manageable when addressed collectively rather than on an individual basis (Beebejaun et al., 2015). As the audience members felt better equipped to take action themselves, they also became keener to work with others in order to find solutions, as demonstrated by the eagerness of participants to connect with others during the Q and A session following the performance. In addition, Encompass practitioners and professionals also noted internal change as a result of the FGM event. Thea, the midwife, for example, put aside her concerns about acting, prioritizing the need to disseminate knowledge and understanding about FGM practices above her own lack of confidence to act. Many of the attendees expressed a willingness to engage in future projects in order to create solutions to the FGM practices occurring within the local community. As such, the theatre can be seen as a nexus committed to demonstrating a combination of reactive and proactive organizational practices, through which new connections were made in response to individuals' desire to tackle a shared problem (Kohn & Cain, 2005). While this suggests that participants were changed on an individual level due to an increased willingness to broach a difficult issue, it further suggests that future community change is possible and likely.

In addition to the performance being described as memorable by the majority of the attendees, it also evoked a mixed range of emotions not likely to occur with traditional forms of presentation. Many found the performance "emotionally draining" and "quite traumatic" yet very "powerful", "informative" and "useful" (observation notes). Continuing in a similar vein, participants suggested that the FGM event gave them the ability to overcome feelings of fear and being overwhelmed by the topic (Cox, 2012). This addresses Berg and Denison's (2013) call for different types of interventions in the attempt to eradicate FGM practices. In turn, this extends the literature on the role of creative methods and co-production in creating change by

demonstrating that theatrical interventions can be powerful tools for change and for disseminating messages on difficult topics.

In order to achieve collective change, a significant level of dialogue between the participants of the FGM event was necessary. As such, the event served to unite the efforts of its co-producers, thereby allowing them to pursue their shared goal of addressing FGM practices within the local-community (Fenge et al., 2012; Kumagai, 2012; Meisiek & Barry, 2007). While the components of the FGM event (presentations and performance) differed with regards to the style of information given and the reaction provoked from participants, they both offered unique insights for attendees into the FGM practices occurring within the local community. In addition to a dialogue that was facilitated, a level of reciprocal dialogue was also evident between the attendees during the Q and A sessions. Indeed, the attendees themselves became co-producers of the event as their participation within the Q and A sessions offered additional knowledge and perspectives of the FGM practices occurring within the local community.

This paper argues that theatrical interventions increase participants' understandings and engagement with difficult topics in comparison to more traditional methods of presentation. The FGM documentary performance ensured that the participants were able to empathize and connect with difficult topics and with each other. This is a form of co-production made possible only by theatrical interventions. Participants displayed strong emotional reactions to the FGM performance which served to illuminate the severity of the issue and the pressing need to change at an individual and collective level. Such strong reactions provided a sense of empowerment for participants, as they were willing to put aside their own negative feelings in order to come together to work on the issue, as demonstrated by their determination to share contact details to undertake future collaborative work on community FGM issues. As such, this paper suggests that efforts for change will be bolstered by such connections, which are likely to prove more fruitful than individual efforts for change on FGM practices.

Conclusion

The co-produced FGM event provides a valuable example of the role of theatrical interventions in facilitating change through the exploration of a taboo subject in which community voices and experiences are prioritised. Furthermore, the FGM event illuminates the benefits of a flexible organization, capable of alternating between reactive and proactive practices in catering to participant needs. Clark and Mangham (2004) suggest that collective change can stem from individual engagement with theatrical activities. In this paper, we argue that despite participants' uncomfortable feelings, the FGM performance was a memorable experience through which individuals had the opportunity to connect through a shared goal and discuss potential solutions together. A consequence of this connection can be seen in the feeling of empowerment gained by participants, resulting in the potential for future co-produced work on FGM in the local community. In addition, we suggest that theatrical interventions have the ability to spread the messages emanating from the theatre. Creative methods such as performance serve to instil the information presented within the minds of participants, while also offering a more personal connection with affected individuals. Theatrical interventions can, therefore, be seen as valuable tools for change, particularly when used in conjunction with co-produced activities involving multiple and diverse individuals. As such, we agree with the existing literature supporting creative methods, such as theatre, as valuable tools in facilitating change (Durden, 2013; John, 2013; Stager Jacques, 2013; Westwood, 2004). In addition, however, our paper extends the literature through the development of links between co-production and sensitive topics, an area little explored in the current literature which tends to focus on the role of theatre as a tool for organizational change (Broderick & Pearce, 2001; Stager Jacques, 2013; Westwood, 2004). Moreover, we also demonstrate the connection between creative methods and the necessity of a flexible organization, capable of being both

proactive and reactive, if co-production practices are to prove a success when dealing with somewhat taboo topics.

The authors also, however, acknowledge the limitations of this study. Of the 46 individuals invited to participate within this study, 23 failed to respond, potentially signifying that only those with positive views of Encompass's work chose to participate. Moreover, only 4 males responded to the interview invitation, thereby giving the study a primarily female perspective of Encompass's work. Furthermore, this study is not generalizable due to its focus on the work of one award-winning theatre department. As such, this paper suggests that further research is needed upon the potential uses of theatrical interventions in creating change for marginalised communities. Such research would prove helpful in developing deeper understanding of how theatrical interventions can be successfully used in practice in order to trigger co-production with the potential to lead to change.

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